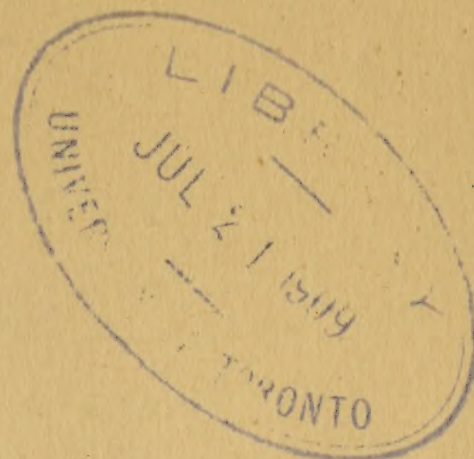


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YALE UNIVERSITY PRIZE POEM

1909

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THE ANCIENT MANUSCRIPT

BY

WALTER L. FERRIS

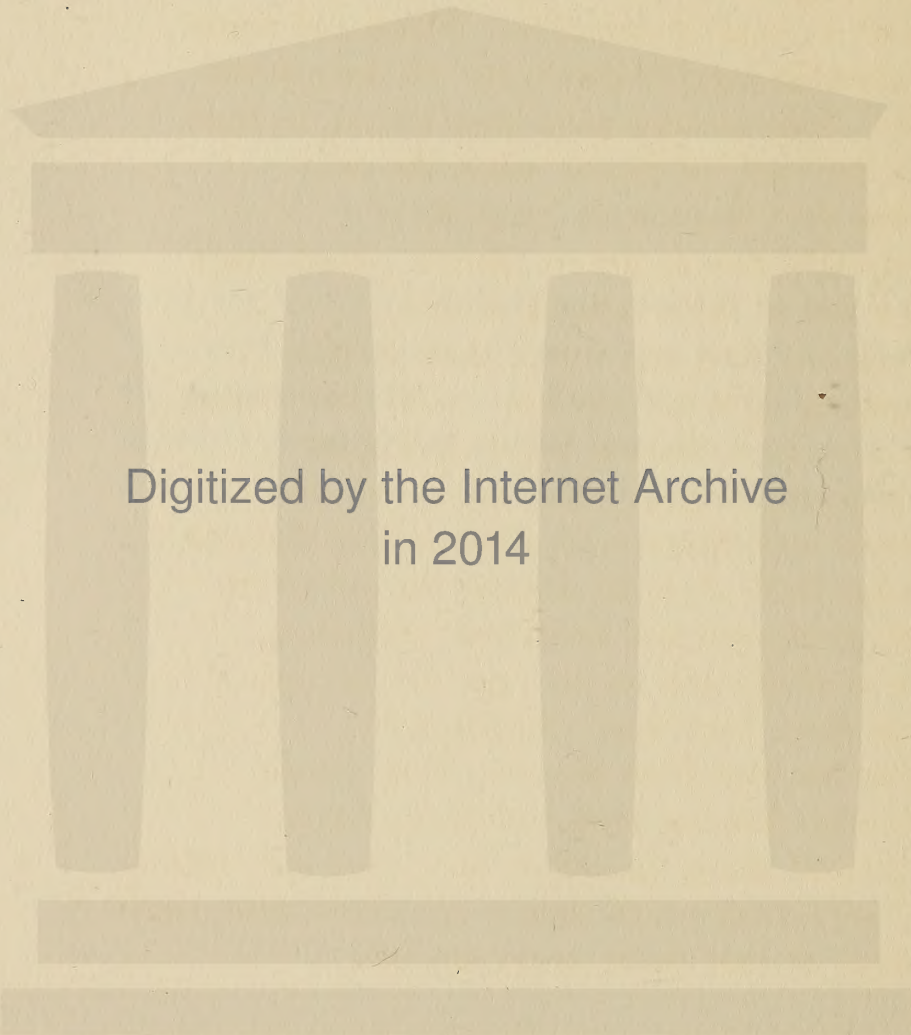
NEW HAVEN

THE TUTTLE, MOREHOUSE & TAYLOR COMPANY

1909

PREFATORY NOTE

This poem received the twelfth award of the prize offered by Albert Stanburrough Cook to Yale University for the best unpublished verse, the Committee of Award being Professors George H. Nettleton, Stockton Axson, and Edward S. Parsons.



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THE ANCIENT MANUSCRIPT

I keep strange company to-night, because
My heart is deep in question. These old saints
Are somewhat cold of cheer, for all their words
Are fire. This ancient must have traced his lines
With a live coal for pencil, while the pain
Bit to the very marrow of his soul,
And wrought this agony of speech. Each page
Is like a bed of little dancing flames,
That leap and dart and weave their fantasy
Of changing light and shadow. And their breath
Is like a restless flaming wind that beats
And sways the slender house wherein I dwell,
Buttressed and girded with what pain of thought!
Strange fire! It is no wonder the old Greek,
Musing on heaven and earth and substances,
Saw in it God's last secret; no, nor strange
That air-born fancy saw a kindly god
Winging his way from heaven's steep citadel
To place his flaming reed within the hands
That groped along their cheerless way; nor strange
That Jove's deep wrath should light upon him, stern,
Immortal, at that great revealing gift.

For light is born of flame, and the swift gleams
Pierced through the shrouding darkness and made plain,
Increasingly, earth's daylight mysteries.
And with the stealing, grateful warmth that crept
From hand to heart, and heart to brain, there grew
A thrilling sense of life. First, trees and rocks,
The clouds, the winds, through the baptismal fire,
Engendered souls in the new thought of man.
But now cold fear, the shadow of the flame,
Followed with stealthy tread. For wilful winds,
And seas that strike with calculated blow,
Become thrice dangerous. Then, as the light grew,
These lesser beings merged into one God
Whose heart was flame—perhaps Jove's ancient wrath
At the god's kindly gift, become eternal,
Now lighting upon man. So the flame spread
Before men's starting eyes until it grew
The half of heaven—a mighty flaming hell,
Wherein God's anger 'gainst the soul of man
Finds its most sacred vengeance; and the cry
Of stricken hearts that rose continually
Was, 'Save my soul; O God of fire, my soul!'
And then, because all men above the brute
Would save their neighbors from a burning house,
Or equal fate, if done at small expense,
Man cried out to his fellow, 'Save thy soul,

Oh, save thy soul from hell!' And if some one,
Who chanced to think a little by himself,
Suggested that the fear was overdone,
And love was somewhat, he was seized upon,
And straightway shown, with proof satirical,
The force of fire. Well, it sounds barbarous;
Yet he was sure to burn in the same way
For some few million years, and a half hour,
Or minutes more or less, added to these,
Would not mean much to him, but would indeed
Be proof to God that those who set the flame
Were worthy heaven, and prove a wholesome sight
To any who might chance to think. And then,
It would anticipate heaven's best delight
When those in bliss should see, across the chasm,
The writhings of the lost.

The proof I find,

In all this dreary waste where Fear is law,
Is this: Force lives in fire!—witness these words
That burn upon this page. And the next day
After such writing he would stand and preach,
This ancient, to a crowd of wide-eyed folk,
And, being saint and poet too, would see
Before him, not a crowd, but seas of flame
Where wallowed writhing souls. And then, as though
His flesh felt the hot breath of flaming wrath,

He screamed his warning to those breathless ones
Who yet might save their souls. It is not strange
He drove them all within his fold—if that
Could mean salvation, which, conveniently,
It did to him.

But now my question is,
Where has the fire gone? Perhaps the god
Repented his rash venture, and has stolen
Jove's secret back again. For, since the time
This monk was writing, men have used the gift
To make dissecting knives, and drills to probe
The earth's dark places, and great telescopes
To dare heaven's very gates, and find out hell,
And laugh in its despite, as being born
In madmen's brains, too credulous and fearful.
Or has the fire been sucked up from the deep,
To roar through furnace-blasts, and forge the bands
That wrap the earth in harnesses of steel,
And bind the Pleiades? Howe'er it be,
The shadow, Fear, is gone, and the fierce flame
Has lost its sting. For men are busied so
With finding how God works, there is no time
To fear. And if a shadow should be found,
A thousand eyes would probe it, and gray heads
Would buzz about its substance, its relation,
And what great Kant would find its place to be

In the mind's structure, and what not, until
The cumulative light would prove so keen
That the poor frightened shadow must needs flee
To the lee side o' the moon, where it might live
Its unobtrusive life.

Yet some faith lives,
Though drained of elemental force. I, too,
Believe in God, and in a glorious life
That surely, through vast love and will and thought,
Shall rise to Him. But yet to save my soul
Does not seem needful—rather find my soul,
Through joyous searching, not through palling fear,
And most among my fellows where God is.
And this because mankind is some way more
Than man; and man to find himself must link
His will and thought and purpose with mankind's,
All finding God together through the best
That lives in each and lives in all, and thus
Uplifting a strong ladder to high God,
Whereon all men may climb. This worthy saint,
When he set out to share his truth with men,
Wrote it in blood, and screamed it from the altar,
And cried so potently that men flocked there.
And when I stand and speak and look upon
The sea of faces, my heart shrinks with pain
At deadly earthliness and stolid sin;

But yet to lift them up I cannot rave
And curse, and call hell's fire upon them. Hell
Is vanquished, and the soul is given wings,
And the broad realm of universal light
Is her dominion. She's no longer chained
To one or other, hell's deep sea of wrath
Or heavenly streets of gold. And when my soul
Goes venturing through the light, and tries to speak
Some messages of beauty, my words fall
Like quiet drops of rain upon a pool
Hid in the forest, while in the world without,
In sea and land and sky, a thundering sound
Goes up from the storm-riven earth to God,
Drowning all fainter voices.

Thus it is,
The mind that ventures wide gets lost in wonder,
And when it stays sedately down it finds
So much of truth in everything, the lines
That sunder right and wrong, the good and best,
So faint, that while it views this side and that
The fire is waning. And the harsh racking world
Thunders so mightily, there needs a voice
Speaking a truth so certain and so loud
That men must hear, and leave the pleasant paths
That lead—to what?—this preacher says to hell,
And I must say, at worst, to loss of being,

At best, a lagging back in the great train
That marches very surely on to God.

And yet this question goads me. Is the force,
The fire, convicting power, essential truth?
Or is it sealed in the deep heart of God
That less of certainty, and more of search
And groping, more of beauty, more of light
That chases shadows from the universe,
Is higher truth? And is it destiny
That gradually the general heart of man,
Winnowed and purged thus in its wandering,
Shall win, by way of deeper insight, truth
That hides in beauty, shining, vanishing,
Yet always luring by gleams spiritual,
Until we find out God by being drawn
Resistlessly to Him through a great love?

Oh, who shall tell the answer? This good man
Almost convicts me by his thunderous speech
Of cowardice, or lack of strength or sight,
Or undue selfishness of search, the while
Some one beneath my window, drunk or cold,
Needs present love, or warning words, or both.
And yet between my hour and his there yawns
A mighty chasm of thought, and I, like him,
Am one with my own age. God grant to us
That we are nearer Him by all this march!

How the hours pass! This little candle-gleam
Will soon flare out, drowned in a pool of wax—
And then, what of the flame? Will the light flit
To some great realm of sun beyond the dark?
What if my flame of life, at some deep hour
Before the stirring dawn, should be snuffed out
In a great pool of silence? Shall I then
Be merged once more in the vast whole of being,
And win, by timeless moving on and on,
The unutterable secret—not alone
In a great musing silence, set apart,
But as the mighty whole is interfused
With stealing sounds of newer mysteries;
As though deep organ-tones should fill the sky,
First thunderous pedal-notes, then harmonies,
Innumerable voices, mystic, sweet,
Triumphant, swelling with diviner passion,
Flooding the sky with melody that seeks
Each space and cranny of the universe,
And fills the void of heaven? And were I there,
How quickly would my sense respond, and feel
The meanings that are said? And how, O God,
Should my soul know my soul in that vast sea?

Ah, there the veil is drawn. But this I know—
There is no fear in me, sweet night, no fear!

